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**Soccer, identity and sporting citizenship in Ireland: border crossings**

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## **Introduction**

The issue of international representation has become a complex and thorny one in world sport, highlighting distinctions between national identity and sporting citizenship. Increasing regulatory flexibility means that many sportspeople now have the option to represent more than one country in international competition, whether by virtue of birthplace, residency, ethnicity, or family origins. A complex array of factors underlie this with historical colonial links and established migratory pathways contributing to a situation where people elect to represent a country other than the one they were born or brought up in. In soccer, adjustments to regulations have also allowed a degree of switching between 'junior' and 'senior' levels. This phenomenon allows countries with limited pools of players to draw on a wider array of talent, while for players themselves it may offer the chance of competing on an international stage that might otherwise be denied them.

The Republic of Ireland men's soccer team were an early example of an international side making strategic use of more liberal selection policies, drawing on the extensive Irish diaspora in Britain to augment the playing squad from the mid-1980s onwards. This policy has at times been regarded as 'poaching' of players, with aspersions occasionally cast on the degree of Irishness of the team. A further layer has been added to this complexity deriving from the existence of separate Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland international teams. The political divisions in Northern Ireland mean that many northern nationalists have eschewed identification with the north's team, preferring to transfer their allegiance to the Republic in what might be seen as an intrinsic expression of a northern nationalist identity. Supporters' loyalties have been mirrored by players themselves in recent years as some northern-born players from Irish Catholic nationalist backgrounds have elected to play for the Republic. The apparent 'defection' of players such as Darron Gibson and James McClean has engendered considerable controversy. This chapter focuses on these issues of identity, citizenship and sporting representation. After providing some context, the chapter briefly

reviews the Republic of Ireland's use of non-Irish-born players before focusing specifically on the issue of players born north of the border switching allegiance to the Republic and reactions to this phenomenon.

### **Soccer and International Representation**

Sports teams can be considered to be representatives of the nation and the players and competitors might be seen as its bodily enactment, at least for the duration of a major sporting event. In this way, sport renders the nation visible and in some contexts the formal recognition of a national team has significant symbolic value. Palestine's membership of both the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and *Fédération Internationale de Football Association* (FIFA – the sport's governing body world-wide) provides it with a degree of legitimacy. Kosovo was granted membership of FIFA in 2016 and now competes as a full nation in international competition though it has yet to attain a seat at the United Nations and its independence is strongly opposed by Serbia who continue to lay claim to the territory.

While acknowledging the role of sporting events in projecting a sense of the nation, the question arises as to who can represent the nation. National identity is conventionally seen as a set of cultural traits shared by members of that specific national community (Storey 2012). Often people's national identity is officially defined by virtue of the country in which they were born or grew up. Of course for many it is not always this straightforward, particularly those who have grown up in multi-national families or with migrant family backgrounds linking them to other places. Equally, for people in societies with significant ethno-national divisions, questions of identity may be quite complicated. In turn this raises questions over the nature of citizenship and who is deemed to be a member of the nation. In sport, different sporting codes have different eligibility regulations which intersect with national citizenship requirements. Amongst many complex examples are Irish and South African-born cricketers appearing for England and the New Zealand rugby team drawing on players originating in Pacific island nations. In soccer, some countries such as Algeria and Morocco rely increasingly heavily on their European diasporas, selecting sons of emigrants to Europe, mainly France (Storey 2019). Meanwhile, other countries such as Equatorial Guinea have controversially pursued a policy of 'nationalising' players with tenuous, if any, connections at all with the country. Another layer of complexity is added as sportspeople may be allowed to switch countries under specific circumstances. In soccer, this has given rise to some

controversy with suggestions that mercenary and utilitarian motivations increasingly over-ride feelings of national affinity. There may be pragmatic reasons for players to choose a country but equally such strategies make sense for countries with limited numbers of players enabling them to utilise talented individuals and to boost the available player pool. In these ways the national identity accorded to an individual may differ from their own feelings of identity.

FIFA regulations, and those of other sporting bodies, could be said to be an amalgam of both civic and ethnic senses of national identity whereby players may represent either their country of birth (civic) or of family origin (ethnic). In men's soccer, current regulations effectively permit players to play for a country whose citizenship they are eligible for whether through birth, descent or residency. In this way for some sportspeople they may have a number of options when it comes to choosing which country to represent. While the sporting citizenship they choose may align with their feelings of identity, it may not necessarily do so. The rules also allow for switching allegiances as long as the player has not played a full competitive international for his original country. As Holmes and Storey (2011) suggest there is a range of motivations for players to swap. For some there may be a clear affinity with their country of choice while for others their decision may be more pragmatic based around career enhancement. Seiberth *et al* (2017) found that young soccer players of Turkish origin growing up in Germany appeared to be making career-driven decisions regarding which country to represent with ethnic identity appearing to play only a minor role in their decisions. In choosing which country to compete for, sportspeople might be seen as making a very public statement of allegiance but it would be misleading to assume that this necessarily reflects their feelings of identity. The connections between national identity and sporting citizenship may be somewhat more complex. While sport may function as an arena in which national identities are performed, the feelings of identity of some of those performers may be more layered and complex than is implied through the symbols, flags and anthems that accompany such occasions.

Career pragmatism may over-ride identity but this does not necessarily mean an abandoning of that identity. Kanemasu and Molnar (2013) suggest that when Fijian-born rugby players elect to play for other nations, they may be making a pragmatic choice in opting for a stronger team. However, in so doing they are also representing Fiji on a global stage so that there is a symbolic importance alongside the players' pragmatic negotiation of career development (Horton, 2012). Grainger *et al* (2014), in discussing the 'capture' of young

Samoan-eligible players by New Zealand, argue there is a distinction between a more fluid and less geographically-bound sense of identity juxtaposed to the exclusivity associated with a 'standard' notion of citizenship. Traditional ideas of citizenship assume a relationship between an individual and the state in which the former are granted rights in return for duties. More recently, the nature of citizenship has come in for increased scrutiny and the concept has come to be seen as broader and less geographically bound (Yarwood 2014). All of this suggests that the complex connections between place of birth, residency and ancestry need to be more fully taken into account rather than placing undue emphasis on a singular idea of citizenship.

In soccer, some countries have utilised migratory and colonial connections to good advantage, pursuing instrumentalist policies that expand the pool of available players and it has become an increasingly common phenomenon for some smaller countries. Many Caribbean teams now draw on second-generation players born in Britain providing opportunities for some players to play internationally that would otherwise not be available to them (Storey 2019). Elsewhere, teams like Turkey and Croatia have displayed an increasing willingness to tap into their extensive overseas diasporas. This strategy has also been used pragmatically by the Republic of Ireland since the mid-1980s with a very clear policy of drawing on the Irish backgrounds of many players born and brought up in Britain (Holmes and Storey 2011).

While nationality 'swapping' has been a long-standing sporting phenomenon (Jansen and Engbersen 2017), it appears to have become more common of late. This switching of nationalities has been controversial with some depicting it as undermining the values and symbolic importance of international sport through weakening the bonds between players and nation. It has been suggested that instrumentalist and commercial values are undermining sporting virtues as cultural affinity is afforded a decreased importance (Iorwerth *et al* 2012). There are serious concerns at apparent attempts to garner national sporting success through the naturalising of sportspeople and the fast-track granting of forms of sporting citizenship (Phan 2013). However, while countries such as Equatorial Guinea and Qatar have endeavoured to expand their player pool through the capture of non-nationals, Jansen *et al* (2018) suggest that much nationality swapping involves what they term reverberative causation whereby people switch allegiance to their parents' country of origin.

## **Republic of Ireland and ‘Plastic Paddies’**

In the mid-1980s, the Republic of Ireland were one of the first countries to systematically utilise FIFA regulations allowing for the selection of sizeable numbers of British-born players of Irish parentage or grand-parentage to play for them. Prior to that period a small number of English-born players had been selected but this appears to have been on a very *ad hoc* basis. It was only with the appointment of Englishman Jack Charlton as team manager in 1986 that a concerted attempt at widening the player pool was initiated. Since then, the selection of so-called ‘plastic paddies’ - players born outside Ireland - has remained an enduring phenomenon, drawing on Ireland’s extensive diaspora. In its early days particularly, the policy provoked some negative reactions from soccer fans and observers in Ireland over what many saw as the diluted sense of Irishness contained within the team and lingering suspicions that for some players a careerist rather than cultural motivation was at work. Conversely, for others the phenomenon was seen as a justifiable reclaiming of the extensive Irish diaspora, reflecting a more global sense of Irishness and a recognition of the multi-layered nature of national identity (Holmes and Storey 2011). Of course, the Irish teams of the late 1980s and early 1990s enjoyed greater success than those of previous eras so it is a moot point that, had performances not been so good, the fan reaction might have been considerably more critical. Since that period, the strategy has to a considerable extent been normalised as many other countries have pursued more flexible selection strategies. Countries such as Algeria and Morocco have utilised their extensive diasporas in France to widen the pool of players on which they can draw. Fan reactions in Ireland in recent years have been relatively muted suggesting an acceptance of a pragmatic selection policy.

Amongst the players, attitudes appear to be on a spectrum ranging from those who seem to have grown up with a strong sense of Irishness, to those where a more instrumentalist motivation has been in operation. For some players there has been an apparent affinity with Ireland that predates their decision to play for the national team. For example, Preston-born Kevin Kilbane claims to have always felt a sense of affinity with Ireland claiming “I always wanted to play for Ireland and no other country. My dad is from Mayo and my mum is from Waterford. So despite the way I speak I’ve always felt Irish” (quoted in Pierce 1999). Mick McCarthy captained Ireland at the 1990 World Cup and is currently in his second spell as national team manager. He was born in Barnsley, the son of an Irish father. At the start of his international career, McCarthy suggests that his affinities were not indisputably Irish in that, although, “I was aware of my Irishness ... it wasn’t my country. I wasn’t born there, I lived

in England all my life. But to get the opportunity to represent my dad in Ireland was brilliant” (quoted in Hogan 2001). But as his Irish career developed, so his attitudes changed. When manager of the team at the 2002 World Cup finals, he wrote: “We stand for *Amhrán na bhFiann*. I sing the anthem in Irish, having learned it phonetically, proud of the song, proud to sing it in our native tongue in a Yorkshire brogue” (McCarthy 2002). However, for other players a more overtly careerist motivation may well have been at work. Maidstone-born Andy Townsend, who captained Ireland during the 1990s admitted that when first approached “the thought of playing soccer for Ireland just didn’t seem ... right (as he) had never set foot in Ireland before and was feeling just a touch uncomfortable .... Technically Irish, I was never more conscious of my Englishness and my South London accent” (Townsend 1994, p.74-75). When first selected, London-born Clinton Morrison (whose qualification was, like Townsend’s, due to an Irish grandmother) stated “I could pull on an Ireland shirt and feel passionately about it because it’s international football and everyone wants to play international football” (quoted in Moxley 2001).

More recently, two English-born players who previously represented Ireland by virtue of Irish grandparents have reverted to their country of birth. Birmingham-born Jack Grealish and London-born Declan Rice both played for Ireland at under-age levels but in 2015 the former switched allegiance to England though he has yet to gain a full cap. Meanwhile, Rice, capped on three occasions at full international level in friendly games by Ireland, announced in 2019 that he was switching his international allegiance to England. In doing so, he issued a statement asserting his dual identity.

“Like so many people around the world, I consider myself to be of mixed nationality. I am a proud Englishman, having been born and raised in London. However, I am just as proud of my family’s Irish heritage and my affinity and connection with the country” (quoted in *The Irish Times* February 13 2019).

While Rice acknowledges both his Irish and English roots he has been placed in a position where he has had to definitively and publicly choose one over the other. This has led to some negative reactions in Ireland and, intriguingly, Kilbane and Townsend, themselves English-born former Ireland internationals have been critical of the scenario. The functional element in player thinking is further exemplified by some who made a pitch for Irish selection, though ultimately were never selected. In 2011 Nottingham-born Jermaine Pennant stated “My grandad is Irish, so there's a chance I can play for them. I'm not getting any younger and I

would like to play international football ... Of course, I would love to play for England, but it has never happened and I don't think it is going to" (quoted in *The Guardian* 8-3-2011). Like some others who made similar overtures, Pennant's ambitions were not to be realised as Ireland did not pursue an interest in the player.

### **Border-crossers**

While the policy of selecting non-Irish born players has become common practice, in the past decade or so an extra dimension has been added to the debate over player selection for the Republic's team. Some Northern Ireland-born players from Irish nationalist backgrounds have chosen to play for the Republic, an option available to them by virtue of their entitlement to Irish citizenship. This is not an entirely new phenomenon with an early, though slightly complicated, example occurring in the 1990s when Alan Kernaghan, born in England but with northern Irish grandparents, and subsequently raised in Belfast, elected to represent the Republic. Indeed, Kernaghan played for the Republic in the highly charged atmosphere of a 1993 World Cup qualifier against the north at Windsor Park in Belfast to a backdrop of jeers and verbal abuse from northern supporters. More recently, Kernaghan has claimed in a newspaper interview that it was always his ambition to play for the north, but he was unable to do so as the Irish Football Association (IFA) in Belfast at the time had a policy of not playing players born outside Northern Ireland (Beacom 2015). When his playing career was over, Kernaghan went into coaching and at one point was on the staff of Glasgow Rangers, a Scottish team traditionally associated with staunchly Protestant and unionist support. Subsequently he managed Belfast club Glentoran for a brief time.

More recently, serious controversy over northern born players 'defecting' to the Republic emerged when Derry-born Darron Gibson switched his allegiance south in 2006. Gibson was seen at the time as an emerging young talent and his apparent defection became a subject of debate in the Northern Ireland assembly and the source of much media commentary. Subsequently, others such as Marc Wilson, Shane Duffy and James McClean have opted to transfer their allegiance to the Republic. When exploring this cross-border switch three elements appear to be relevant. Firstly, there are those who appear to see themselves as Irish, as distinct from being northern Irish and hence have no problem playing for the Republic. A second element that may reinforce this attitude has been the aspects of sectarianism associated with the Northern Ireland team and its supporters. Thirdly, there may well be a



functional element in players having elected for what, at the time, might have been seen as the stronger team.

Northern-born players who have played for the Republic have suggested that issues of identity have been central to their decision. Marc Wilson, born in Aghagallon, County Armagh, initially represented Northern Ireland at schoolboy level before opting for the Republic's senior team. Around that time, he stated in an interview that "I think everybody has their own personal reasons for wanting to play for the Republic or the North. I grew up supporting the Republic so it was a comfortable decision for me" (quoted in Finn 2006). In a similar manner Shane Duffy (born in Derry), initially capped by the north at various under-age levels, has expressed very similar sentiments in suggesting it was a logical outcome of his own loyalties saying "I only played for Northern Ireland because I was at a Northern Irish school. I was always changing to Ireland as soon as I turned professional" (quoted in Liew 2017). This phenomenon might be seen as a logical extension of a long-standing tendency amongst those from a nationalist background in the north to define themselves as Irish, to carry an Irish rather than British passport and, amongst those who follow the game, to support the Republic's team rather than Northern Ireland, as noted earlier.

Derry-born James McClean is the player who probably best exemplifies an overtly political and cultural motivation in his decision to opt for the Republic. McClean represented Northern Ireland at under-21 level but subsequently switched to the Republic. The player's background and sense of identity have come to the fore in his club career in England through his attitude to the wearing of the poppy. November each year in Britain brings with it the annual remembrance events for soldiers who have died in conflict. In the weeks leading up to Remembrance Sunday (the Sunday closest to 11th November) the wearing of poppies has become a well-established custom. The poppy is a symbol adopted by the Royal British Legion, a charitable organisation that supports current and former British military personnel. In late October and early November politicians and other public figures will usually be seen with a poppy prominently displayed. Most leading soccer teams in England have in recent years worn specially designed shirts that incorporate an image of the poppy in games played on, or close to, Remembrance Day in what has now become something of a ritualistic event. McClean has consistently refused to wear a shirt emblazoned with a poppy throughout his career with a variety of English clubs. While a Wigan Athletic player in 2014, he took the further step of writing an open letter explaining his actions. While justifying this clearly in relation to his Irish nationalist background, a very place-specific reasoning also emerged. In

his letter McClean firmly links his decision to the fact that the poppy has different connotations in different places, specifically in the north of Ireland and in Derry it is viewed in a quite specific way.

“For people from the North of Ireland such as myself, and specifically those in Derry, scene of the 1972 Bloody Sunday massacre (when 14 people were shot dead by British soldiers), the poppy has come to mean something very different .... for me to wear a poppy would be as much a gesture of disrespect for the innocent people who lost their lives in the Troubles – and Bloody Sunday especially ... It would be seen as an act of disrespect to those people; to my people. I am very proud of where I come from and I just cannot do something that I believe is wrong” (statement available on Wigan Athletic club website).

In a subsequent interview McClean went on to say “Northern Ireland is not my country. Unless you're from where I'm from, Creggan - which was a big part of The Troubles when I was growing up - unless you're from there, you don't really understand” (quoted in Hogan 2015).

McClean has also cited the symbolic elements of representing Northern Ireland as a contributory factor in his decision to represent the Republic suggesting “You don't really feel at home. I think any Catholic would be lying if they said they did feel at home, seeing all those flags (Union Jacks) and hearing the songs and chants” (quoted in Young 2012). He is not alone in alluding to sectarianism as other players from Catholic backgrounds have indicated they felt somewhat marginalised within the Northern set-up. Standing for ‘God save the Queen’ (the anthem used by Northern Ireland) and the flying of union jacks and Ulster flags by supporters leaves some players feeling somewhat uncomfortable. There is a history of sectarian chants at games and loyalist graffiti in and around the team’s home ground of Windsor Park in Belfast. The ground is the home of the Linfield club which historically has drawn the vast bulk of its support from Protestant communities in the surrounding areas and it is a space that came to be seen as increasingly uncomfortable for many from a nationalist background (Bairner and Shirlow 1998). Northern international Niall McGinn, who hails from a nationalist background in Dungannon, has spoken of the anthem issue suggesting that for players such as himself there is a need to “put your head down and try to get through it ... you have boys like Michael O’Connor and Sammy Clingan who are Catholic boys from Belfast and they just keep their heads really low so as to not make a scene but also to show that as Catholics they must be respected” (quoted in McGee and Bairner 2011).

Although support for the Northern Ireland team may have been predominantly Protestant, a sizeable number of Catholics have played for them over the years. At Northern Ireland internationals some Catholic players experienced intense verbal abuse from their own fans. This is best exemplified by the fate of Belfast-born Anton Rogan, regularly booed by his own Northern Ireland supporters in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This appears to have been a consequence of his playing his club soccer at the time for Celtic (the Scottish club with strong Irish connections), rather more so than for his Catholic background. Later, in 2002, the Catholic-born Northern Ireland international Neil Lennon received a loyalist death threat leading to his retirement from international soccer. At the time, Lennon was also a Celtic player. In view of this background, the IFA have engaged in efforts to create a more inclusive environment through attempts to eliminate sectarian chanting and stricter regulation on permissible flags and emblems. While there is evidence to suggest an increase in support for the team amongst the Catholic population, many nationalists continue to eschew identification with it, expressing their Northern nationalist identity through support for the Republic.

Although some players appear to have a deeply held cultural motivation for their decisions, others have displayed a more pragmatic stance. Some have switched allegiance to the Republic, only to subsequently revert back again. Three examples are Michael O'Connor, Tony Kane and Gerard Doherty. O'Connor and Kane initially represented Northern Ireland at under-age level before being selected for the Republic's under-21 squad in the early 2000s. O'Connor never actually played for them and within a year both had reverted back to the north, though Kane has never yet appeared for the north's senior team. O'Connor, now a full Northern Ireland international, has claimed since that "It's always been my ambition to play for Northern Ireland and I never thought about playing for the Republic" (quoted in Ferguson 2008). Gerard Doherty represented the Republic at under-18 level but was subsequently chosen for a Northern Ireland squad (though he was not selected to play).

Another intriguing example is Shane McEleney, born in Derry. Having opted to play at under-21 level for the Republic he is cited as saying:

"Deciding to represent the Republic has given me something new and to be honest, it gets me away from all the political problems you have up here [in Northern Ireland]. The thought of now being able to represent "my country" makes me feel great ... I do see the Republic of Ireland as my country" (quoted in McGee and Bairner 2011).

More recently, McEleney has indicated his availability for selection by Northern Ireland, though his brother Patrick has expressed a wish to represent the Republic. It might be argued that the stance of O'Connor, McEleney and some others displays a somewhat functional attitude; unlikely to make it in the Republic's team the option to play for the north was still there, so career progression intersects and over-rides feelings of identity and alienation. In these instances, the distinction between national identity and a pragmatic adoption of a sporting citizenship seems readily apparent. Eunan O'Kane, born in County Derry and who switched to the Republic in 2011 after playing for the north's under-age teams, has implied it is predominantly a career choice rather than a cultural one. "I just felt my opportunity wasn't going to come playing for Northern Ireland and the Republic have come and asked me to come and join them, so it's kind of a no-brainer to take the decision to the country that want you" (quoted in Luney 2011).

An added dimension to this situation emerges for players born in Britain of northern Irish descent. Here the situation becomes still more complex as they are eligible to play for their country of birth or for either Irish entity (as was the case with Kernaghan, referred to earlier). Norwich-born Alex Bruce never made it to an England squad but his grandmother hails from Northern Ireland and, originally selected for a Northern Ireland under-21 squad, he subsequently elected to play for the Republic, ultimately winning two caps. His reasoning at the time appeared singularly pragmatic: "I'm going to pick the Republic purely because I think they are a better team" (quoted in *The Irish Times* 2006). As these were in friendly internationals he remained eligible to play for Northern Ireland and did so in 2013. However, his selection however proved unpopular with many northern supporters who harboured doubts over his loyalty and commitment. Another version of this is the case of Adam Barton, born in Lancashire to Irish parents, who initially represented Northern Ireland in a senior friendly international and subsequently the Republic at under-21 level. Another English-born player, Johnny Gorman from Sheffield, initially played for the Republic at under-16 level but subsequently played for Northern Ireland at various levels up to full competitive international level.

In summary then these various examples suggest that a combination of identity, sense of alienation and a desire for career progression intersect in a complex matrix, helping to shape decisions over which Ireland to play for.

## Reactions

The phenomenon of northern players ‘transferring’ south has, not surprisingly, generated a range of reactions. In Northern Ireland there has been much resentment at what is seen as the ‘poaching’ of players. At the time of the Gibson furore the IFA argued that players needed to have a parent or grand-parent born in the Republic or to have lived there in order to qualify. FIFA, however, re-iterated its view that players born in the north had the option of playing for either entity by virtue of their entitlement to Irish or British citizenship, or both. That northern-born players are free to choose between the north and the Republic is a view further reaffirmed in the Good Friday agreement (the 1998 peace agreement which effectively brought an end to ‘the troubles’) that

“recognise(s) the birthright of all the people of Northern Ireland to identify themselves and be accepted as Irish or British, or both, as they may so choose, and accordingly confirm that their right to hold both British and Irish citizenship is accepted by both Governments”.

The IFA felt sufficiently strongly on the issue to go far as to take a case to the Court of Arbitration for Sport in 2010 over another player, Daniel Kearns, who opted to represent the Republic after playing for the north at Under-19 level. The case was lost as the court concluded (not surprisingly) that northern-born players were entitled to Irish citizenship and hence, were eligible to play for the Republic. Ultimately from a northern perspective there is the problem that this only operates in one direction as there can be no reciprocal transfer.

The apparent ‘poaching’ of players by the Republic saw a partial boycott by northern fans of a match in Dublin in 2011 between the Republic and the North. More than 20 years on from the Good Friday agreement, while many northern supporters may remain far from pleased, some have moderated their displeasure by acknowledging that if a player does not want to represent them, then they clearly lack the necessary commitment. As noted earlier, the case of McClean has provoked a particular level of fury. Some ex-players have also spoken out with former Northern Ireland international Keith Gillespie accusing McClean of hiding behind religion in opting for the Republic arguing that “if you’re born in Northern Ireland you should not have the option of playing for the Republic” (quoted in Lavery 2012), a view at complete variance with FIFA eligibility regulations. Another former player who agrees with Gillespie is Anton Rogan, perhaps surprisingly given the abuse he received from northern fans during his own playing days, alluded to earlier. Rogan has suggested that “if you’re born there you play for Northern Ireland” (quoted in McKinley 2016). Rogan goes on to cite the

presence of players from nationalist backgrounds in the current northern team as evidence of its success in widening its appeal.

Within the republic a broadly pragmatic stance appears to hold sway exemplified by former goalkeeper Shay Given (born in the border town of Lifford) who suggested

“I could have played for Northern Ireland... My mother was from Castlederg in Co Tyrone. But it’s up to the players to choose who they want to play for. And we need to strengthen the squad” (quoted in Malone 2010).

However, there are some dissident voices. The team’s one-time manager, Brian Kerr, has expressed a different perspective arguing that

“While the policy is legitimate under FIFA rules, ably abetted by the Belfast Agreement, I feel it is unfair, seedy and predatory to have such a policy towards a neighbour. Just imagine if the boot was on the other foot” (2010).

Tensions were raised somewhat in 2018 when Northern Ireland manager Michael O’Neill (himself from a Catholic background) suggested in a newspaper interview that the Republic’s authorities were targeting young Catholic players in an attempt to encourage them to switch allegiance (Doggett 2018). At the time of writing a tug-of-war appears to have emerged concerning a young player, Michael O’Connor (a different O’Connor to the one mentioned earlier) born in the Republic but who, in December 2018, indicated a wish to play for the north, from whence his grandmother comes (Beacom 2018). Despite this, in January 2019 he accepted a call-up for a Republic under-21 squad. O’Connor also plays his club football in the north with Belfast club Linfield.

## **Conclusions**

The increased flexibility of soccer’s regulations (like those in other sports) allows players greater choice in who they represent at international level. For some players born in Northern Ireland, the decision to switch to the Republic appears motivated by cultural or political considerations. However, it also seems clear that career prospects may intersect with this causing some players to make strategic decisions and, to an extent, to hedge their bets.

However, it is useful to bear in mind that playing for the north does not mean lack of affinity with Irishness; sporting citizenship, as with official citizenship, may be rather different from

an individual's national and cultural orientation. Following a 5-0 victory for the Republic over the north in a friendly international in 2011 (referred to above) the crux of the issue was made abundantly clear when Northern Ireland player Niall McGinn (somewhat unusually and perhaps not very wisely) declared himself a Republic of Ireland fan in a live post-match interview on Irish television, an utterance that led to a very hostile reaction from Northern supporters.

Over two decades on from the Good Friday agreement, the IFA themselves, while understandably frustrated over the loss of players to the Republic, have endeavoured to ensure that their set-up is welcoming of players regardless of political background. Former international Michael O'Neill, appointed as Northern Ireland team manager in 2012 (and himself a Catholic), has made clear an intention to ensure an inclusive environment in which those from nationalist backgrounds can feel comfortable playing for Northern Ireland. In recent years the fortunes of the Northern Ireland team have risen and, at the time of writing, the north's international ranking is higher than the Republic. It might be worth speculating that northern-born players may now see transferring allegiance to the Republic as less appealing in terms of career development than it might have been a few years ago. Both the north and Republic qualified for the finals of the 2016 UEFA European Championships held in France, the first time that both teams had made it to the final stages of the same major competition and both enjoyed some success in progressing to the knock-out stages of the tournament. Both teams brought with them many travelling supporters bedecked in green whose boisterous and generally non-belligerent behaviour was widely praised, though the presence of two Irelands and two 'green armies' was confusing for some. Both teams were managed by former Northern Ireland internationals and some players in each squad might, if things had worked out differently, been playing for the other Ireland. There appears to be a growing acceptance of the situation and a reluctant understanding that players may wish to explore the options open to them.

**Note:**

Soccer is used throughout this paper in order to distinguish it from the Irish sport of Gaelic football.

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